

Wilson's staff helps constituents with passport woes

Washington - Massive backlogs at passport processing centers have reportedly derailed honeymoons and dashed the vacations of some American travelers this summer. Congressman Charlie Wilson's staff has been working to help the constituents of Ohio's Sixth District battle the log jam caused by new air travel restrictions.

"My staff's favorite story so far is the victory they accomplished for Susan Spears," said Wilson.

The Huntington Faith United Methodist Church choir had been planning a singing trip to England and Wales with other churches since August, 2006. In need of an extra first soprano they invited 54-year-old Susan Spears to join them in early March, 2007. Spears accepted the choir's invitation and immediately applied for her passport.

Twelve weeks of rehearsal and planning later, Spears still had no passport. Many calls and emails to the National Passport Information Center led to the promise of a new passport that was supposed to be mailed overnight. It was scheduled to arrive the morning of Friday, June 8, the same morning the choir planned to drive to Dulles International Airport, located outside of Washington, D.C., to catch a plane London.

The passport did not arrive and the choir's travel agent advised Spears that she wouldn't be able to go on the trip. The Rev. Bill DeMoss, a minister at Faith United Methodist Church, had other ideas and encouraged Spears to board the bus for the seven hour drive to Dulles.

"I was thinking to myself, if nothing else I'll have a nice ride to Washington and then go home," Spears said.

From the bus DeMoss called Congressman Wilson's office in Washington and reached Wilson's Chief of Staff, Beryl Hall. At first Hall wasn't sure there was anything anyone could do. But the bus was on its way, a choir was scheduled to leave and a soprano needed to catch her plane.

At one point Hall had the travel agent, the Charleston passport office, the Special Issuance office and DeMoss on the phone at the same time. The Special Issuance Office finally agreed to issue Spears a passport that day and allow her to come to the head of the long line of several hundred people. There was one condition: Spears had to get there by 4:30, before the office closed. It meant the whole bus had to give up stopping for lunch so that Spears could make it to the office on time.

Hall quickly dispatched two of Wilson's staff to drive to the airport, meet the bus and race Spears to the Special Issuance Office. Two staff workers may sound excessive, but parking wasn't possible on the timetable they had; one had to stay with the car and one had to run with Spears.

"I had ancestors that came from Wales and it just meant so much for me to go," said Spears. "I would have cried a lot if I hadn't been able to go."

The fast-paced team effort worked. Wilson's staff escorted Spears inside the office where she picked up her passport. Hall called DeMoss who was waiting with the choir at the gate at Dulles. "There was a great hurrah! We were all exuberant," said DeMoss. "I don't know what happened except we prayed a lot. It was just a miracle, really."

Wilson's office can't always work miracles, but the staff is able to make a call on behalf of constituents and in some instances, depending on the complexity of the case, a call is enough to make a difference. "We wish we could do this for everyone who had a passport problem, but the stars just aligned on Spears' case," said Hall.

Spears and the choir had a successful and safe trip where they performed seven concerts. "It was the trip of a lifetime," said Spears.

Wilson wrote a letter earlier this spring to Sec. of State Condoleezza Rice about the excessive and frustrating passport delays his constituents face. The State Department simply didn't hire enough staff fast enough to meet the spiked demand for passports triggered by a new security law.

Earlier this week the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) delayed by six months a new border-security requirement that citizens traveling by car, boat or cruise ship must present a passport. This move follows the government announcement less than two weeks ago that the rules requiring passports of airline passengers would also be delayed by a few months.

The relaxed laws will help, but passport woes will not go away overnight. Some reports estimate the State Department will be playing catch-up through the summer and it may be the end of the year before the agency returns to its usual passport turnaround time of six weeks.

In the meantime Congressman Wilson encourages constituents to call his office at 1-888-706-1833. Wilson's caseworkers currently field 10-20 passport calls a day.

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